

A Study of Gender Performativity in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Mocking Biography*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at concentrating on Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance and how Virginia Woolf challenges the assumptions of heterosexuality in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1992). Woolf rebels against the traditional view of gender as two separate categories by presenting Orlando as an androgynous and bisexual character. Orlando's transformation from male to female and exhibition of the characteristics of both femininity and masculinity expose how gender norms are socially instituted. Woolf portrays Orlando's attraction to both men and women. He/she loves Sasha regardless of what changes her body undergoes, but he/she marries Shelmerdine because he/she is bisexual. Woolf also shows clothing as signifiers of the social construction of gender and how characters flout this convention by using cross dressing.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; *Orlando*; androgyny; bisexuality; gender performativity.

INTRODUCTION

Until the late 1970s, Virginia Woolf was considered "an exemplar of a high modernist aesthetics" (Caughie, 1991, p.1). Most of the critics have considered her "an exemplar of a feminist writing practice" (Ibid). Lee notes that "from the 1960s onwards, rival myths took shape out of the libertarian, radical and feminist movements of the time, constructing Virginia Woolf as a bold, revolutionary pioneer, a Marxist and lesbian heroine, a subversive cultural analyst" (Lee, 1996, p. 107). Woolf's works can be analyzed in different perspectives. In *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (1991), Caughie explores the relations between Woolf's textual experiments and current theories of language and narrative. Her works question the relations among modernism, postmodernism, and feminism in narrative discourse. She observes, "In *Orlando*, androgyny, transsexualism, and transvestism call into question not just conventional assumptions about sexuality but, more importantly, conventional assumptions about language itself" (Caughie, 1991, p. 79). Marcus refers to anger and androgyny as the two terms which are most fully discussed in Woolf's works, and she remarks, "*A Room of One's Own* is seen by many critics to subdue and repress women's anger in favor of a more serene gender-transcendent or androgynous

creativity" (Marcus, 2006, p. 229). Woolf's use of androgyny and her innovation in narrative technique as a modern writer have inspired the researcher to embark on the present paper by applying Butler's idea of gender performativity to Woolf's selected novel, *Orlando* (1992).

Following Michel Foucault, Butler deconstructs the stable categories of binary oppositions such as man \ woman, male \ female, by revealing how "they are discursively constructed within a heterosexual matrix of power" (Butler, 1990, p. 30). Butler marks her aim in her celebrated work, *Gender Trouble*, "to center on-and decenter-such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality" (1990, p. xxix). She believes that the subject's gender and sexuality are not naturally equivalent or correspondent to each other, but are constructed through sequences of repetitive acts and doings. According to Butler, norms are based on repetition. As Cosgrove puts it, "Because the norm can never fully determine the subject and is based on repetition, there is room for these norms to be subverted" (2011, p. 3).

Woolf declares that it is only through exploiting both the feminine and masculine sides of our mind that we take advantage of our full potential as human beings. She writes, "Androgyny is the combina-

tion of masculine and feminine characteristics, and creating a balance between them” (Woolf, 1977, p. 106). Her notion of androgyny is impelled by her instinct that the greatest happiness of human life results from the natural cooperation of both sexes. As she marks, “The normal and comfortable state being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating” (p. 106).

Woolf calls into question the system of binary opposition of male/female in heterosexual society by using androgynous characters. She proclaims that there is no division between male and female. We can find both male and female features in every person one. She writes, “One must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (1977, p. 112). Similarly, Butler claims that gender is ‘unnatural’, so that there is no necessary relationship between one’s body and one’s gender. As Salih puts it, “it will be possible to have a designated ‘female’ body and *not* to display traits generally considered ‘feminine’: in other words, one may be a ‘masculine’ female or a ‘feminine’ male” (2002, p. 46).

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* tells the story of an individual named Orlando. The novel runs from the sixteenth to the twentieth century during which Orlando matures and changes the sex midway through the novel. Changing the sex is pivotal in the development of his/her character, as well as discovering the similarities between man and woman despite the differences in clothing and social roles they play.

By using cross dressing and sex change, Woolf reveals the contrast between Orlando’s appearance and his/her essence, reinforcing his/her androgyny and bisexuality. As Butler marks, “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. It is built on the correct repetition of behaviours” (1999, p. 178). Yet each of us, “in some small or trivial way, sometimes fails to repeat perfectly” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 77). This failure to repeat not only is evidence of the artificiality of gender system, but also reveals that “there is inevitably—even accidentally—a continuous, even unplanned resistance to the norms of gender” (p. 77). It is in drag, that is clothing associated with one gender role when worn by a person of another gender, that this failure to repeat reaches its most clear and significant expression. Orlando’s cross-dressing demonstrating his/her bisexuality violates the norms of clothing based on gender.

This essay is concerned with how Woolf deconstructs the stable categories of man \woman by portraying androgynous characters in *Orlando*. Such characters

take gender roles which are not biological or natural, but rather social constructions. Orlando’s shift in sex and gender creates an ambiguous gender identity whose characteristics challenge the roles of “compulsory heterosexuality”.

DISCUSSION

Orlando, Sasha, and Shelmerdine as Androgynous Characters

In the very beginning of the novel, Woolf particularly referring to Orlando’s gender makes it clear that the role of social conventions in formation of gender identity is undeniable, “He for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters” (*Orlando*, 1992, p. 13). Commenting on that Lee says: “it is evident from the first line of the book that Orlando’s manly/ womanly characteristics overlap” (1977, p. 149). The word “disguise” draws attention toward the fact that there are some contrasts between Orlando’s appearance and real self, which Woolf deals with in depth later in the novel when Orlando is transformed into a woman. She says: “In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (*Orlando*, p.181).

Through keeping the contrast Woolf tries to show that Orlando as a man and Orlando as a woman are the same character. She proclaims: “If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes” (*Orlando*, p. 180). Caughie refers to this passage and says: “It is in the midst of all these contrarities [...] that Woolf offers her famous androgynous statement [...] not as a resolution to or a synthesis of contrarities, but as a way to remain suspended between opposed beliefs” (Caughie, 1989, p. 44).

The description of Orlando’s physical appearance by the narrator in the first pages of the novel, mixing masculine and feminine features, again creates the sense of ambiguity and undermines the criteria of identifying gender based on appearance. “The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down [...] the arrowy nose in its short [...] eyes like drenched violets” (*Orlando*, p. 15). Orlando is shown as a handsome man who has some delicate features which could be described as feminine. Despite enjoying both

feminine and masculine features in his/her appearance, women find him attractive and are attracted toward him/her. The narrator asserts: "For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn" (*Orlando*, p. 181).

The ambivalence of Orlando's sexual identity is set as a framework for the whole text, and Woolf undermines the relationship between gender and sex from the very beginning in the text. As Butler observes, "gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (Butler, 1999, p. 11).

Woolf uses male pronoun for Orlando when he/she is biologically female. This amalgamation of male/female representation of Orlando can be found in many descriptions: "His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace [...] Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass" (*Orlando*, pp. 132-33). Since there was no single pronoun to define Orlando, being both she and he, she seemed to constantly vacillate between both pronouns.

In order to recognize Orlando's character, one should refer to definition of the words 'self' and 'subject'. As Mansfield puts it, "the word 'self' does not capture the sense of social and cultural entanglement that is implicit in the word 'subject'" (Mansfield, 2000, p. 2). What Mansfield means is that 'the self' is not affected by the social laws, but 'the subject' is constructed by such laws and the relationship with people. Woolf also uses the term 'private self' to refer to the self, and uses the term 'public self' to refer to the subject. She believes that the private self is fix. As Howard puts it, "the private self can be conceptualised as a fixed, unitary, and bounded identity" (Howard, 2007, p. 44).

Orlando's private self, unaffected by social law, does not change but his subjectivity, which is influenced by such laws and his/her relationship with people, changes and develops throughout the novel. Orlando's gender identity or subjectivity is also produced and guided by the spirit of the age that provides for him/her the ability to experience the ways and customs of multiple regions.

Orlando's transformation into a woman and living among the Gypsies allows him/her to learn that there is no difference between so called opposite sexes, because there is a less defined gender dichotomy

among the Gypsies: "the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (*Orlando*, p. 147).

But the spirit of the age had changed in the Victorian period, and "Orlando was forced to acknowledge that times were changed" (*Orlando*, p. 221). There were restrictions of cultural regulation of sexual difference between men and women in nineteenth-century. For the performance of gender they had to wear clothes prescribed by and considered suitable by the society. According to Woolf, Orlando "would have to buy twenty yards or more of black bombazine, she supposed, to make a skirt [...] One might see the spirit of the age blowing [...] upon her cheeks" (*Orlando*, p. 225). Orlando learns how each period with its own culture has its norm for everyman, and how social laws determine the differences between men and women.

The narrator declares: "The change of sex though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity [...] their faces remained the same" (*Orlando*, 1992, p. 133). It is the case with Orlando whose sex has changed, but his/her self, identity, and world view have not. Lee observes: "The historical organization of *Orlando* is, then, a means of showing how Orlando stays the same, not how she changes. Similarly the sex change does not alter Orlando's character, but her perceptions and her social behavior" (1977, p. 151).

Orlando attempts to move beyond the false gender dichotomies which insist on showing the distinction between men and women as natural. Butler writes, "If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (Butler, 1999, p. 10).

Orlando has a tendency toward odd and ambiguous characters like Sasha who show double sexual identity as is seen in the dancing scene: "He had indeed just brought his feet together about six [...] when he beheld [...] for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" (*Orlando*, pp. 35-36). There are two qualities about Sasha that attracts Orlando. One is that she speaks French, not English, which shows that Sasha comes from a different culture and is not bounded to the conventions of Orlando's country, and the other is that she wears clothes that hides her sexual identity. It indicates that Sasha like Orlando is an androgynous.

The following description provides a more solid evidence of the ambiguity of Sasha's sexual identity: "She would come alone, in her cloak and trousers,

booted like a man. Light as her footfall was, it would hardly be heard, even in this silence" (*Orlando*, p. 57). Sasha wears unisex clothes that is appropriate both for men and women. Hinting at Sasha's clothe "oyster-coloured velvet" (*Orlando*, p. 36), and her eyes, "which look as if they've been fished from the bottom of the sea" (*Orlando*, p. 37), makes it clear that Sasha enjoys striking feminine features that attract Orlando. She sometimes wears dresses which cloak her gender, Orlando's attraction toward Sasha reinforces his/her androgyny.

Woolf parodies gothic romances in the passages with Orlando and Shelmerdine. It is comic that Shelmerdine sweeps Orlando off her feet and they would know everything about each other within only two minutes. Orlando and Shelmerdine love each other because the latter finds some masculine features in the former, and the former finds some feminine features in the latter. Shelmerdine is described as "a man as strange and subtle as a woman" (*Orlando*, p. 246) and Orlando is described as a woman "who could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man" (*Orlando*, p. 246).

Shelmerdine is introduced as a rebel and independent adventurer. When Orlando cries "Oh! Shel, don't leave me! [...] I'm passionately in love with you" (*Orlando*, p. 240), an awful suspicion rushes into both their minds, which represents polymorphous nature of their sexual identity: "You're a woman, Shell!" she cried. "You're a man, Orlando!" he cried. Never was there such a scene of protestation and demonstration as then took place since the world began" (p. 240).

By contradicting man and woman as two constructed categories, Woolf open a space where their gender/sex identities might "negotiate and combine multiple singularities" that move beyond the fixed binary oppositions. Hargreaves hints that "Orlando does reach a form of personal freedom with Shelmerdine, as each sympathetically draws out the 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities of the other" (Hargreaves, 2005, p. 89).

Orlando's Bisexuality

Nineteenth century, the period defined as oppressing in terms of social conventions, has begun, and Orlando not being able to openly express her sexual interest in Sasha has to marry a man. The narrator says: "A girl had to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age and take a husband [...] this was against her natural temperament" (*Orlando*, p. 232). Forbidden homosexuality suppressed sexual desire in him/her and it is the case with his/her melancholy.

Orlando almost always thinks about Sasha. The narrator remarks: "It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago" (*Orlando*, 1992, p. 92). But the fact is that the source of that pleasure, Sasha, is no more and in reality she experiences melancholy. Butler marks the same experience when she says: "the foreclosure of homosexuality appears to be foundational to a certain kind of heterosexual version of the subject. The formula 'I have never loved' someone of similar gender [...] heterosexual 'being' is traced to this double negation, which forms its constitutive melancholia" (1970, p. 23).

At the beginning of the novel, Orlando is introduced as a shy, very handsome, but clumsy boy of sixteen. Woolf describes his/her melancholy in these words: "She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid" (*Orlando*, p. 226). Here, the use of double pronoun in referring to him/her is noticeable. Somewhere else she says about him that "he was strangely compounded of many humors of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude" (*Orlando*, pp. 70-71). It is through these oppositions that Orlando's character is constructed. As Caughie notes, "Orlando's identity, like her poem, is a palimpsest. Orlando continually wavers between beliefs, changes or disguises her sex" (Caughie, 1989, p. 44).

Orlando's bisexuality makes him/her keep away from society and spend most of his/her time writing the poem "*The Oak Tree*". In this regard Ronchetti observes, "Orlando's preference for solitude is his/her love of nature, symbolized by the oak tree" (Ronchetti, 2004, p. 84). Orlando's writing habit appears to offer a refuge from the pressures of life lived among others. Woolf uses nature as a place, where Orlando writes his/her poem, to emphasize that Orlando's erotic feelings are natural and find expression only in the lap of nature. Here, the binaristic opposition of nature/culture is very meaningful.

Nature is one of the external elements that form his/her subjectivity, and Orlando writes his/her poem when he/she is in close contact with nature: "There was the garden and some birds. The world was going on as usual. All the time she was writing the world had continued" (*Orlando*, p. 259). He/she embraces the nature as if it was a part of his/her identity: "All this, the trees, deer, and turf, she observed with the greatest satisfaction as if her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely" (*Orlando*, p. 300).

Throughout the novel, an actual oak tree on Orlando's property has provided a place of refuge and inspiration. Orlando was "stretching his limbs out under the oak tree, and thought "What an admirable life this is"" (*Orlando*, p. 101). The oak tree on Orlando's land is a familial property, and Orlando writes his/her poem under the oak tree. But Orlando's poem 'The Oak Tree' is a woman's property. McDaniel refers to the tree's role — a real property — in writing Orlando's poem and suggests that "The Oak Tree" [Orlando's poem] acts as a kind of metaphorical tree taken from the ground a word released from the patriarchal power of real property" (2012, p. 730). Orlando writes the poem 'The Oak Tree' to question the power of oak tree as a material property. At the same time he/she emphasizes on the inspiration he/she perceives from the tree in creating his/her poem as a woman's real property. It points to the fact that imagination is a woman's real property or power as is the case with female feminist writers.

Since Orlando in composing the poem imitates the tradition of male writers, his/her poem lacks authenticity. It is considered a sentimental poem in the Victorian period and not be published. But in the twentieth century when Orlando has experienced an androgynous ideal through marriage, he/she finishes and publishes the poem. According to Woolf it is Orlando's androgyny that makes this possible. Referring to this she says: "the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness" (p. 106). Thus the union of the male and female in Orlando helps to escape from the prison of gender, and enables him/her to complete and publish the poem. This also helps Orlando and Sheldermine to live in harmony and experience a spiritual cooperation between the male and the female mind.

Orlando: A Mocking Biography

Orlando (1992) is dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, an aristocrat, whose independent spirit inspired Woolf to explore the concepts of androgyny and bisexuality. Sackville-West engaged in lesbian relationship with Woolf while simultaneously maintaining her marriage and family. Susan McNamara (2011) writes, "The nobleman/woman is not an exact portrayal of Vita [...] there are various clues to her identity [...] her perfect French, her prolific literary output [...] her legs, and her prize-winning poem "The Land," which Woolf turns into "The Oak" (2011, p. 633).

Orlando is a text that breaks down the limits that order our understandings of biographical practice and

identities. As Burrells marks, "That discreet and stable categories are disrupted, and fixed notions of gender and sexuality are fractured, dispersed, and reduced to absurdity" (2007, p. X).

In *Orlando*, the biographer constantly reminds the reader of his presence and his distaste for sentimentality and non-historical narrative developments. Woolf mocks real biographers who record the actions of great men and underlines the outer world of the protagonists. Orlando's biographer devotes attention to both Orlando's inner and outer world, and highlights the complexity of his/her character. Orlando is an artist and poet whose trade is the expression of ambiguity, which complicates the biographer's work. The narrator says: "The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over [...] in telling the story of Orlando's life" (*Orlando*, p. 63).

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The biographer's work becomes more complicated when Orlando's transformation takes place. Lady of Chastity, Lady of Purity, and Lady of Modesty, the three cardinal hegemonic values of femininity cry "But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Truth! [...] The Truth and nothing but the Truth!" (*Orlando*, p. 129). When Orlando transforms into a woman, the three muses leave Orlando, "we leave. Come, Sisters come! This is no place for us here" (*Orlando*, p. 132). The biographer remarks: "Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature" (*Orlando*, pp.133-34). Orlando's transformation subverts the fixed structures imposed by the biographer or narrator.

Clothing and Cross Dressing

Clothing

Woolf uses clothing and costumes to question the presumed ideas about clothing and how each period with its own culture and norms perform gender through clothing. When Orlando transforms into a woman, the narrator describes her dress: "Orlando [...] dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (*Orlando*, p. 134). Unisex clothe worn by Orlando covers up her sexual identity, or rather maintaining its ambiguity.

In the Victorian period, women used to wear crinoline which showed their passiveness. The narrator describes Orlando's reaction to wearing crinoline, "It was heavier and drabber than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements" (*Orlando*, p. 233).

Woolf ridicules the rule of clothing as a presentation of gender ideality. She proclaims that clothe is only the appearance and every person has the capacities of both sexes. She states: "The change of clothes had [...] much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem [...]. Clothes are but a symbol of something hide deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (*Orlando*, pp. 179-80). Similarly, Butler says: "I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman. Added to these, however, are the political needs" (2011, p. 176). Gender is depicted as an outfit to wear, denoting its constructedness.

Cross Dressing

There are examples suggesting that Orlando is biologically a woman, but he/she performs the role of a man. Dressing as a man, Orlando enters Leicester square and meets Nell. She leads Orlando to her room. She plays the role of woman who wants to rouse Orlando's manhood. When Orlando reveals her real identity as a woman, there is a change in her manner, "her manner changed [...] I'm not in the mood for the society of the other sex to-night" (*Orlando*, p. 208). This indicates the mobility of Orlando's gender.

Archduke is a man who loves Orlando, but he cheats Orlando by using cross-dressing to make her think that he is a woman. Archduke performs the role of a woman by only changing his dress, which itself reveals that gender role could be established through performance. The narrator says: "The Archduchess (but she must in future be known as the Archduke) told his story—that he was a man and always had been one" (*Orlando*, p. 171).

When Orlando found out that he was a man, the narrator says, "she recalled to a consciousness of her sex which she had completely forgotten" (*Orlando*, p. 171). This extract suggests that it is only through the opposites that one's sexual identity is defined. The Archduke's same-sex desire for Orlando as a man and his cross-dressing in order to approach him contains an underlain homoeroticism which is not clear until the reader learns about his transvestism.

CONCLUSIONS

In *the novel*, Woolf criticizes the heterosexual society by presenting Orlando as a bisexual and androgynous character who lives for more than 300 years during which his/her gender develops. The long span of life serves as a background against which the change of his/her sexual identity in every era is explained. Orlando experiences the advantages and disadvantages of both sexes in each age, and discovers that the differences between men and women are socially constructed and defined. He/she attempts to move beyond the common beliefs that the dichotomies between men and women are natural. Woolf shows that clothing is a signifier of the social construction of gender and through flouting this convention by using cross dressing she mocks at the rule of clothing as a presentation of gender ideality. She proclaims that clothe is only the appearance and every person has the capacity of both sexes.

Orlando escapes from the confines of heterosexuality, the pressure of which bring forth his/her melancholy, by writing the poem "*The Oak Tree*". The poem is completed in twentieth century only when he/she has experienced an androgynous ideal through marriage in which Orlando escapes from the prison of gender. Orlando and Sheldermine are able to live in harmony as the male and female in them coexist in peace.

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